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Photos by Mike Disfarmer | Courtesy Utah Museum of Fine Arts A portrait by Arkansas photographer Mike Meyer Disfarmer, part of the exhibit "Mike Disfarmer: Cleburne County Portraits," now on display at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

The Depression, in tiny rectangles at Utah Museum of Fine Arts

By Sean P. Means | The Salt Lake Tribune

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Want a photo of the family? Nothing to it these days: Whip out the smartphone, snap a shot and post it on Facebook.

Of course, it wasn't always so easy — and an exhibit now on display at the [Utah Museum of Fine Arts](#) provides a fascinating glimpse into the way families in a particular time and era captured the important moments of their lives.

Photos



At a glance

Disfarmer at UMFA

The photographic exhibit "Mike Disfarmer: Cleburne County Portraits."

Where » [Utah Museum of Fine Arts](#), 410 S. Campus Drive, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

When » Through July 14.

Hours » Tuesdays–Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. (until 8 p.m. on Wednesday); Saturdays–Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; closed Mondays and holidays.

Admission » \$7 for adults; \$5 for seniors and youth (6 to 18) and Utah higher education students; free for University of Utah students, staff and faculty, military families, children under 6, and UMFA members.

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to not smile," Poulton said.

And Disfarmer would never tell subjects when he had opened the shutter — no "say cheese" warnings — so they didn't know exactly when the photo was being taken. "People would stand here and kind of get lost in their thoughts," Poulton said.

The exhibit, "Mike Disfarmer: Cleburne County Portraits," displays some 70 small photo prints taken in Heber Springs, Ark., from the 1920s to the 1950s by a man of whom little is known.

Mike Meyer Disfarmer was "the town recluse, the Boo Radley" of Heber Springs, said Donna Poulton, UMFA's curator of art of Utah and the West, and the curator of this exhibit, open through July 14. Not much was known about him except that he played the fiddle, had a falling-out with his parents and had his named legally changed to Disfarmer — because he believed, incorrectly, that Meyer was the German word for "farmer."

But, Poulton said, "he was a bit of a visionary," and his form of portraiture was idiosyncratic.

People in and around Heber Springs would come to Disfarmer's small studio, paying 25 cents — no small amount back then — to mark births, weddings, anniversaries and other milestones of life.

As Poulton describes it, Disfarmer would set his subjects against a white wall with a large black stripe running down the middle. He would give them detailed instructions, telling them to keep still. Then he would step behind a wall, into which his large camera was embedded. The camera took old-style glass-plate negatives — outdated technology even then, as celluloid film had been introduced — with a slow exposure time.

Often the black stripe would seem to come out of the subject's head, something most photographers avoid. In a photo of what's apparently a newly married couple, the black line cuts between them ominously.

Because people had to stand so long, Poulton said, very few people in the photos smile. "It's harder to hold a smile than

story continues below

Some pictures show families in their best clothes. For men and boys, that sometimes meant a suit and tie, but just as often it was their least-worn pair of bib overalls. For women and girls, it was a dress,

sometimes fancy but often not. Poor farmers, shift workers, middle-class families all stood still before Disfarmer's camera, a replica of which stands in the exhibit space.

One of the most touching parts of the UMFA exhibit includes photos taken during World War II. These photos show men in uniform, sometimes alone, sometimes with their wives or children. Those who have just joined up have clean uniforms, buttoned up to the collar, with few decorations — these men have yet to earn their medals. The ones who are back from service have their collars open, a look of relief that they're away from the fighting.

Looking at these photos of young servicemen, Poulton said, "you begin to wonder, 'Did this person come back?'"

Disfarmer's work was as much a chronicle of the Great Depression as the photographs of Dorothea Lange, who traveled across America capturing images of the Dust Bowl. The difference, Poulton said, is "they went in search of the Depression, and the Depression just came to him."

Disfarmer died in obscurity in 1959, and his work took on cult status in the years since. Thousands of his prints have been discovered and now grace art collections all over. UMFA has about 200 of them, thanks to donors.

The influence of the photos can be seen all over. Jazz guitarist Bill Frisell recorded an album in 2009, "Disfarmer," with songs meant to accompany a retrospective of Disfarmer's photos. The costume designers for the Coen brothers' "No Country for Old Men" took inspiration from the drab country folk in Disfarmer's photos. Fashion designer Ralph Lauren also used Disfarmer's photos to inspire one of his collections, Poulton said.

Looking at the Disfarmer portraits as a group, one seeks out the little details of people being themselves, the imperfections of life captured forever in gelatin silver prints.

"With these," Poulton said, "you get those happy accidents you don't get anymore with digital, because you just erase them."

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